The Kentucky Interagency Coordination Tool Provides Strategies to Improve the Habitats of Threatened and Endangered Species

By Casey Shrader, State Biologist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service in Kentucky

Compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was often difficult for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field offices for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons included the lack of a straightforward process, the lack of listed species information by planners, knowledge of the habitats and life histories of species, and the reluctance by State and Federal agencies to share information concerning their status or location. As a result, landowners often miss opportunities to work with threatened and endangered species and/or recognize the benefits to those species by installation of routine NRCS conservation practices.

The concept of the tool which eventually became known as the Interagency Coordination Tool (ICT) (and later the Kentucky Version (KICT)) was based on the need to streamline and simplify the Endangered Species Act (ESA) compliance process for NRCS field staff.

Working with various state agencies the idea of a “black box method” emerged where field offices could utilize the internet and GIS to marry all this information in such a way as to provide a tangible printable report based on geospatial data and the NRCS programmatic agreement recommendations through a web-based cloud system. The tool provides a data “firewall” that protects information from both sides of a query. In return, NRCS planners are provided strategies to avoid and minimize impacts to species or designated habitat without identifying exact locations or other sensitive information. Each agency is able to update their data independently. In addition, agencies are able to identify specific instances where conservation practices could have positive impacts and potentially move the species toward delisting.

The ICT tool is currently utilized for compliance with Endangered Species Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act in West Virginia. States that have programmatic agreements could utilize this same tool with their state specific data. The technology was constructed to be readily adaptable for things such as the avoidance of cultural resources or other environmentally sensitive resources that can be geo-referenced.

Once completed the KICT will provide information based on a number of criteria. Using the tool, the NRCS field staff identifies an area of interest and inputs conservation practices and the extents of those practices. The ICT then compares this data to other databases of information including known locations of species, the potential impacts, habitat suitability and agreed upon avoidance measures based on an existing programmatic agreement. The tool then provides a printable report to the end user outlining conservation and avoidance strategies that meet the requirements of NRCS planning policy under the ESA. The KICT is scheduled to be implemented sometime next fiscal year.